DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 161 370 HE 010 601

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TITLE Institutional Research as a Service Function of Higher Education: A Consortium Arrangement with Public School Districts. AIR Forum Paper 1978.
INSTITUTION Mississippi State Univ., State College. Bureau of Educational Research.
PUB DATE May 78
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the annual Association for Institutional Research Forum (18th, Houston, Texas, May 21-25, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College School Cooperation; Community Services; *Consortia; Cooperative Programs; Educational Accountability; Educational Assessment; Educational Resources; Governance; Guidelines; *Higher Education; Information Needs; *Information Services; *Institutional Research; Planning; *Public School Systems; School Districts; Shared Services
IDENTIFIERS Mississippi State University; *Programs of Research Evaluation for Public Schools

ABSTRACT

Institutional research is viewed by many persons as the process of providing appropriate data for the purpose of making sound decisions. The major place for applying the principles of the discipline of institutional research has mostly been in institutions of higher learning and a few large metropolitan public school districts. It is proposed that a consortium arrangement between institutions of higher learning and public school districts can be created to extend institutional research activities to a large segment of public school districts while simultaneously providing benefits for the institution of higher learning. The Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS) is such a consortium that has been developed through the Bureau of Educational Research and Evaluation as one of the College of Education's Programs at Mississippi State University. PREPS is a joint effort between the College of Education and the several school districts. The structure and policies of PREPS are discussed in this paper with emphasis given to considerations to be addressed in establishing and administering such a consortium. The consortium approach of providing institutional research services to public schools through institutions of higher learning offers an excellent format for carrying out a service function through the modes of research and evaluation. (Author)

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ED161370

THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

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HE 010 601

Institutional Research as a Service Function of Higher Education: A Consortium Arrangement with Public School Districts

by

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Paper Presented at
The Association of Institutional Research
Eighteenth Annual Forum
Houston, Texas
May 21-25, 1978

Abstract

Institutional Research is viewed by many persons as the process of providing appropriate data for the purpose of making sound decisions. However, the major place for applying the principles of the emerging discipline of Institutional Research has mostly been in institutions of higher learning and a few large metropolitan public school districts. It is proposed that a consortium arrangement between institutions of higher learning and public school districts can be created to extend institutional research activities to a large segment of public school districts while simultaneously providing benefits for the institution of higher learning.

The Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS) is such a consortium which has been developed through the Bureau of Educational Research and Evaluation as one of the College of Education's Programs at Mississippi State University. Therefore, PREPS is a joint effort between the College of Education and the several school districts. The structure and policies of PREPS are discussed in this paper with special emphasis being given to considerations which must be addressed in establishing and administering such a consortium.

In essence, the consortium approach of providing institutional research services to public schools through institutions of higher learning offers an excellent format for carrying out a service function through the modes of research and evaluation.

Introduction

Institutional Research is viewed by many as the process of providing appropriate data from institutional records to administrators for the purpose of making sound decisions. In most cases the term "institution" has meant institutions of higher learning. There are some exceptions, such as larger metropolitan elementary and secondary public school districts; however, a relatively small percentage of public school districts in our country have access to institutional research services since they lack the size and financial support to justify such an operation. This paper will develop the rationale for creating institutional research consortiums to serve those public school districts that currently are not receiving a service which will utilize talent and resources available in our institutions of higher learning. In addition, the function of the Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS), a consortium built for the above stated purpose, will be discussed.

Needs

The current watchword in education, wedged between "handicapped" and "basic skills", is "accountability". When viewed in more detail, "accountability" is actually a word which infers that educators must do a better job of stating the goals of their programs and evaluating the extent to which they have attained them. Although, "accountability" goes beyond what a traditional institutional researcher views as appropriate work, this movement places great pressure on administrators to obtain appropriate data with which to make decisions. In addition,

accountability laws, such as the one currently in effect in Mississippi, require all school districts, regardless of size, to participate in the program.

Although some school districts do have access to computer services for financial affairs, very few districts have pursued the idea of developing a management information system which would provide access to data in student records which are so vital in curriculum planning. Computer capabilities can also assist districts with computer assisted instruction of programs and test validity analysis studies, as well as provide the more traditional services. Many smaller districts do not have the finances or personnel to set up even a simple financial computerized operation.

In addition, most school districts find themselves with few, if any, personnel who have been trained in the basics of data collection, analysis, and evaluation. One paramount skill necessary for such personnel is to be able to transform data needs of administrators into valid studies and to convert the results into usable formats for interpretation and subsequent decision making. Once again, many districts do not possess the financial resources to hire trained professionals to perform this function even if the administrators desired to do so.

Given the above needs, which exist not only in Mississippi but nationally, the Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS) was created by ten public school superintendents in cooperation with the College of Education at Mississippi State University. Only a few of these districts could have afforded their own program, but they could afford to purchase a limited amount of service as a member of the

consortium. Currently, the consortium seeks to provide three services for member districts: (1) conduct a research study which addresses a problem that is common to all the member schools; (2) complete a unique research or evaluation project custom designed for each member district based on local needs; and (3) schedule inservice educational events designed to aid local school district staff members develop competencies in evaluation and research design. PREPS also is planning to provide computer assistance in the form of Management Information System services for member districts in the near future.

During the 1976-77 school year, the overall project investigated the relationship of several variables traditionally utilized in accreditation to basic skill test scores. A major finding of this report was the phenomenal effect that socio-economic status had on test scores, in some instances explaining 65% of the total variance. This year the overall study is expanding last year's research by looking at teacher attitudes and assessments of time-on-task for instructional activities as they relate to test scores. It is believed that such studies will lead to a better understanding of which variables have the most impact on test scores.

The local projects conducted through PREPS have covered a wide range of interests. While many districts have used the service to evaluate their Title I program, others have conducted student follow-up studies and developed a local criterion referenced test for reading. In addition, some PREPS schools have investigated longitudinal patterns of achievement and examined the effectiveness of various teaching strategies. Some districts have conducted community attitude

surveys while others have investigated the effect of using various testing patterns in evaluating a program. Although they vary widely in content, they do have one common point. Each project was developed by a local district with help from the PREPS central staff to provide data for making decisions about its programs.

Resources

Institutions of higher learning possess many resources which are vital to the success of such a consortium. Some resources are obvious, such as having computer hardware and software necessary to develop data files and to analyze data used in various studies. An institution usually also possesses trained personnel in such areas as measurement, research design, statistical analysis, curriculum development, and other related areas which serve as needed resources to the program. An institutional researcher operates in an excellent position to manage such a consortium. Although limited, the local schools themselves possess two needed resources - money and trainable personnel. Their financial contributions to the consortium, although small for each district member, can add up to a source of income sufficient for the institution to conduct consortium related activities.

Governance

No consortium can be expected to be effective unless it is supported with a sound system of governance. Many times the issues associated with governance are ignored in establishing a service consortium such as that proposed in this paper. In establishing the Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools (PREPS) two

goals were constantly competing for attention. The first goal was seeing that all the participating school districts participated in establishing policy for the program. To assure this input, an advisory council was created that comprised the superintendent of each member school district. One goal of institutional research was to provide top level administrators in each district with the data necessary for decision making. The second goal was to assure that the University would maintain necessary control for smooth daily operation of the program. To accomplish this goal, the University drew up a service contract, or Memorandum of Agreement, which was signed by officials of both the member school districts and the University. By using the service contract approach, the University took responsibility for providing the services agreed upon and the school districts maintained control of the policies of the program, as they relate to the services delivered.

In addition to the formal governance represented by the advisory council and the service contracts, an informal governance pattern is followed when staff members visit and work in each district. In developing the local research or evaluation project, the initial contact in the district is with the superintendent. In each case, the major emphasis is that data which are collected and analyzed will be useful in answering a question which the administrators have determined to be important. Although in many cases the superintendent assigns other staff to work on the project, when the final report is written a meeting is held with the superintendent to explain and discuss the implications of the data. In some cases, the entire school board attends

this meeting. By assuming the role of an institutional researcher and providing data which are useful in decision making, PREPS has been able to make a positive contribution to decision making processes in each member school district.

Benefits

A major motivation for forming a consortium is the benefit the members can derive from the association. For the school districts, the benefits are obvious. School personnel have an opportunity to gain assistance in research and evaluation without having the expense of hiring an entire technical staff. In addition, the school districts have a built-in system through which they can share information with other districts. Should the districts desire additional services--- such as a Management Information System to do student grade reporting and financial records --- these services can be developed for modest additional fees. In short, a consortium arrangement can deliver institutional research services to school districts at a more economical level for all but the largest school districts.

The University itself can realize benefits from such a consortium. An important benefit is the financial resources made available to purchase additional staff to service the program and at the same time, increase the research and evaluation talent available in the University. The program also provides a direct feedback link to the University from the public schools. This association not only provides a functional service outlet, but it also provides a rich resource base for performing evaluation research.

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Development of the Management Information System services allows the University to better utilize current computer facilities. Such better utilization leads to more revenue for the University and to the promise of an opportunity for the University to provide computer service to public institutions. Should an institution value public service as one of its goals, such a consortium affords a natural outlet.

Guidelines

Although, the idea of consortiums is not new, there are four conceptual guidelines which help institutional research consortiums operate more effectively. These guidelines are designed to assist the consortium to function as an institutional research consortium as opposed to merely a general service consortium. Some of these concepts, however, are applicable to both situations.

First, the central staff of the consortium must always view themselves as members of each school district's staff. This premise entails developing a supportive/helping/facilitative relationship with each superintendent and his staff. In addition, the research which is developed must yield data useful to these administrators who must make decisions. Without such an exchange the consortium will be of little benefit to the school districts; hence, they will lose interest and withdraw support.

Second, the fee schedule, payment procedures, and well-delineated services to be delivered, all need to be established in writing before the consortium is begun. An agreement must be reached so that the

income will pay for services delivered. Although this is an institutional research consortium, principles of good business must be followed. A clear communication of the business side of the consortium will lead to a more cooperative spirit among the members, especially if all policies and procedures are mutually derived.

Third, member school districts place the most emphasis on their local project; however, program-wide activities are necessary to provide data having external significance. The districts can benefit from projects which address a common need of all the districts. In addition, the sharing of information among the member schools can help strengthen the consortium concept. By fostering group activities, the members are more inclined to help the consortium grow. An annual research sharing conference is held for this purpose.

Finally, the consortium needs to provide educational experiences for the staff members from the member school districts. If the consortium is to grow and be effective, the staffs in the districts must learn the basics of research and evaluation procedures. This service is especially needed since it allows district personnel to learn to ask pertinent questions concerning data. Receiving input from the districts concerning their educational needs is an excellent method for insuring their involvement.

Conclusion

Consortiums are not new ideas. However, unless federal funds are the control core of financing, most consortiums have been short-lived. The Program of Research and Evaluation for Public Schools is unique

since it was developed at the request of the school administrators and is funded largely through local district funds. The ultimate key for success of this consortium is its service to the local school districts through institutional research.

For years educators in institutions of higher learning have sought channels to provide service to the public schools. By providing good data to administrators to assist their making of decisions, the University can render a valuable service. With increasing demands for accountability and its accompanying evaluation processes, the climate for developing such consortiums seems to be most favorable. By recognizing these needs the University not only provides valuable services but also receives the final benefits in interchange of ideas. The leadership role of institutional researchers in this movement is natural since their discipline is dedicated to producing good data to enhance decision making. Many appropriate practices are already developed in institutional research and are readily applicable in public schools with certain fundamental alterations. The circumstances currently facing public school administrators provide a unique opportunity for institutional researchers to lead the way.